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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: RUSSIAN SCHOOLS INCREASE COURSES
TAUGHT IN ESTONIAN

REF: 07 TALLINN 738

11. (U) SUMMARY: The government's plan to achieve more Estonian-language instruction in Russian-language high schools has proceeded smoothly in Estonia. In September, Russian-language high schools began teaching the second of five (mandated) courses in Estonian. There are indications that a majority of Russian-speakers not only see value in the transition program, but want schools to begin introducing more Estonian instruction earlier. Despite the success of the school program, language in Estonia remains a sensitive political issue. End Summary.

School Transition Program Makes Progress

12. (U) In September 2008, Estonia's Russian-language high schools began implementing the second phase of the Government of Estonia's (GOE) 5-year program to increase Estonian-language instruction. This year, schools had the choice of adding civics or music to the curriculum, following the introduction of Estonian literature classes in September 2007. The end goal of the transition program is for all 58 Russian-language public high schools to teach at least 5 courses (60 percent of their total course load) in Estonian by the year 2011.

13. (U) Many schools are ahead of schedule. In addition to the required civics/music course, 41 of the Russian schools also added one or more extra courses taught in Estonian this year (including physical education, human nature, history and geography). As part of a GOE incentive program, the schools receive USD 7,000 for each additional course they implement (above the mandated number). According to the Ministry of Education and Research (MOER), the schools use the extra funds to pay supplemental allowances to teachers of Estonian, buy training materials and fund extra-curricular activities.

14. (SBU) The GOE considers the school transition program a critical component of its 2008-2013 integration strategy for Russian speakers. A basic level of Estonian is required for acquiring citizenship (although only about 3 percent of Estonia's 111,000 stateless are under the age of 15). More importantly, improving Estonian language skills is viewed as critical for social, political and economic cohesion in Estonia. The working language of public universities is Estonian and the majority of public sector jobs require fluency in Estonian as a primary qualification. People who lack proficiency in Estonian inherently face more limited economic opportunities than the rest of

the population. Also, as a whole, Russian speakers in Estonia still get most of their news and information from Russian-language television news broadcasts, the vast majority of which are produced in Russia. This has resulted in two distinct information spheres in Estonia – reflected, for example, in widely divergent opinions among ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians on the Russian invasion of Georgia. The GOE hopes that as more Russian speakers learn Estonian, their interest in watching Estonian-language media broadcasts will increase.

Language Still a Sensitive Issue

¶5. (SBU) As reported reftel, in 2007 there were concerns that Russian-speaking Estonians would oppose the school transition program. Many in the Russian-speaking community voiced fears that the real goal of the transition program was to assimilate Russian speakers into Estonian society and undermine the importance of Russian language and culture. However, as the transition program enters its second year, it appears that these fears have not translated into significant organized opposition. In fact, there are indications that a growing number of Russian speakers view the school program positively. At an assembly of student representatives of Russian-language schools in January this year, many participants said they want to begin studying new subjects in Estonian even before the tenth grade. They complained that the basic level of Estonian instruction at lower grades does not prepare them to successfully master subjects in Estonian in high school. The GOE responded quickly to the

criticism passing a regulation requiring kindergartens to begin Estonian language instruction at an earlier age (3 years old instead of 5 or 6). The regulation came into force on September 1, 2008.

¶6. (SBU) Earlier this year, approximately one thousand Russian-speaking permanent residents of Estonia (including 200 parents of children in Russian-language schools) participated in a survey commissioned by the MOER and carried out by Estonia's largest marketing research firm. The results indicated higher-than anticipated support for increasing Estonian instruction in Russian schools. The majority of participants indicated they are familiar with the school language transition program and most said they view it positively. More than 80 percent of the respondents said they believe the additional coursework in Estonian will improve their language skills and increase their competitiveness in the labor market.

¶7. (SBU) Organized opposition to the transition program has not materialized in Narva or Tallinn, the two cities with the highest proportion of Russian speakers in Estonia (98 percent and 46 percent respectively). In Tartu, however, parents have established an NGO (called Russian School) which is actively lobbying to keep the curriculum of Tartu's Russian high school taught entirely in Russian. Taking a proactive approach, the MOER has reached out to the group, meeting with the parents and school administrators to discuss their concerns. Meanwhile, the school in Tartu has introduced the two required Estonian courses according to schedule. (Note: Approximately 17 percent of the population in Tartu is Russian-speaking. There are only two Russian-language high schools in the city, one of which is a language immersion school. End Note.)

¶8. (SBU) Still, language remains a sensitive political issue in Estonia. Just over 50 percent of the respondents in the survey (para 6) also expressed concern that Estonian-language studies will endanger the survival of Russian language and culture in

Estonian. Recent comments by Minister of Education Tonis Lukas that he "did not oppose" a proposal to begin Estonian-only education for all students at the Kindergarten level reignited heated debate among politicians on the issue in the press. Member of Parliament Peter Kreitzberg responded with an OpEd explaining why Estonia must keep Russian language instruction and preserve minority culture. (Note: Kreitzberg is a former Minister of Education. He is not in the same party as Lukas, but both are members of the ruling coalition. End Note). Katri Raik, Deputy Secretary General for General and Vocational Education at the MOER told PolEcon Chief that Minister Lukas' comments, were "taken out of context," but had created a "difficult situation for the Ministry." Regardless, Raik noted, the Estonian Constitution guarantees minorities the right to choose the language of instruction in schools and the Minister did not intend to contradict that principle.

Challenges Ahead

¶9. (SBU) An ongoing challenge for implementation of the transition program is ensuring there are enough well-trained teachers in the Russian schools who can teach the required subjects in Estonian. The need for teachers is particularly acute in eastern Estonia. (In the city of Narva on the border with Russia, where 98 percent of the population speaks Russian, it has been more difficult to recruit teachers qualified to instruct in Estonian.) Recognizing this, the MOER has created a number of incentive programs to hire new teachers and retrain the existing staff. One such program, initiated in 2007, encourages graduate students to do a student teaching practicum in schools in eastern Estonia. Last year, 11 graduate students participated in the program; four of which remained in the region as teachers after graduation. The MOER is also using co-funding from the European Social Fund to provide in-service and other training for teachers at the Russian schools. The trainings, conducted in coordination with Tallinn University, Tartu University and the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater, cover course-specific materials (e.g. music, geography etc) as well as bilingual teaching skills.

¶10. (SBU) The MOER concedes that the addition of a history course taught in Estonian at the start of the 2010/2011 school year will also be a significant challenge. Interpretation of history (Russian occupation versus liberation of Estonia during WWII) remains one of the most controversial and complicated issues between Estonia's ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian communities. The MOER produces history materials in both Estonian and Russian for use in all schools. However, Raik pointed out, it is difficult to change teachers "personal perspective" on history. The MOER is working to establish a unified association of Estonian- and Russian-language history teachers. Raik said the goal is to give all history teachers a forum to ask questions and discuss their points of view. The MOER also plans to open counseling centers in four cities, Narva, Kohtla-Järve, Tallinn and Tartu in November 2008. Counselors will make regular visits to schools - to monitor course content, ensure courses are being taught in Estonian as required, and advise teachers.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: Language has been a core component of the GOE's integration strategy since the first integration program was launched in 2000. Progress on implementing the school transition program and the positive response of students is encouraging. However, the Bronze Soldier riots in 2007 made clear that language alone will not bridge the political divide between Russian and Estonian speakers here. In particular, continued outreach in Russian is critically

important. Russian speakers still get much of their news and information from media outlets originating from within Russia that most consider to be biased toward Moscow's point of view. The GOE has recognized the need to increase Russian-language news programming, and in fact has recently hired a new director to their Russian-language television broadcasting service. However, many would agree that the GOE has not dedicated enough resources nor attention to this task. Declining economic growth and a tight budget make it unlikely this will change in the short to medium-term.
End Comment.

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